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Widsith: A Study in Old English Heroic Legend, by R. W. CHAMBERS, M. A., Fellow and Librarian of University College, London. Cambridge University Press, 1912.

Around this poem of one hundred and forty-three lines, Mr. Chambers has written a book nearly as long as Mr. Chadwick's *Origin of the English Nation*, with which it is uniform in size and binding. No student of the *Widsith* will question the propriety of this minute examination. It is abundantly warranted, in the first place, by the great importance and interest of the subject-matter. No single vernacular document, not even *Beowulf*, throws clearer light upon early Germanic ethnography and saga. The significance of its briefest references is far-reaching; and these references cannot be explained in a few words. Again, the poem presents many difficulties of interpretation. Various problems, exceedingly complicated in themselves, have engaged the attention of critics for years, and any careful survey of the piece is bound to consider these conflicts of scholarly opinion, to sift the wheat from the chaff, and to assign credit where credit is due. This task Mr. Chambers has performed exceedingly well. The footnotes and references show how little has been taken for granted, how carefully even minor issues have been guarded. The editor is, if anything, over-conscientious in giving credit to his predecessors, and in noting all his sources of information. In short, the surprising thing is not that the book is so long, but, considering its completeness, that it is so short. It is not only a practically definitive edition of *Widsith*; it is a cyclopedia of Germanic saga. Its pages generally give the effect of conciseness, and it contains little that the expert would wish omitted.

In a book dealing with so many controversial matters, there are naturally some statements from which the reader will dissent. On the whole, however, the decisions of disputed questions display sound judgment. Criticism of details is not, in any case, the object of the present review, but rather an explanation of the general plan and scope of the volume. A

general outline is afforded by the opening chapter, entitled "Widsith and the German Heroic Age." One or two matters are provisionally settled at the outset,—that the piece is not genuine autobiography, and that it is more or less interpolated.

"Our poem . . . reflects a definitely marked period: that of those barbarian invasions of the Roman Empire, which began when the Goths first swarmed across the frontier, and ended with Alboin's falling upon an Italy worn by famine, pestilence and the sword of Visigoth, Hun, Vandal and Ostrogoth. Whether *Widsith* is to be regarded as the work of one man, or as a cento of several heroic catalogues, need not for the moment trouble us; for, though the various sections of the poem may show minor idiosyncrasies, they all reflect the same heroic age. Excluding the lines of Biblical lore, we are left with a poem recording the tribes and chiefs of the German migrations, from the middle of the third to the middle of the sixth century: from Ostrogotha to Alboin."

The following chapter summarizes the epic material connected with the Gothic and Burgundian heroes whom Widsith has supposedly visited. Here it is noteworthy that the editor recognizes that the key to the Eormenric-Ealhild passage lies in regarding Ealhild as the wife, not of Eadgils, but of Eormanric (pp. 21 ff). He is also right, I think, in identifying the hero of l. 115 with Theodoric of Verona, rather than with the Frankish king mentioned in l. 24. In chapter III, which is entitled "Tales of the Sea-Folk, of the Franks and Lombards," particular attention is paid to Offa of Angel, Eadgils, Wade, Hagena and Heoden, Breca, and Theodoric the Frank. Sceafa, Ægelmund, Ælfwine and Eadwine are naturally the prominent Lombard heroes. Mr. Chadwick's treatment of the Breca-episode makes it clear that this is still imperfectly understood. His summaries of the available information about the heroes of saga are almost uniformly satisfying, and occasionally his comments are singularly felicitous, as for example in regard to the tragic elements in *Beowulf*. "We cannot rightly understand *Beowulf* unless we realise the background against which the hero is depicted. The poet meant *Beowulf* to stand out in contrast to the masters of

Heorot, a house of heroes second to none in all northern story, but tainted by incest¹ and the murder of kin almost beyond the measure of the lords of Thebes or the house of Pelops. So he depicts in his hero loyalty, duty, subordination of his own fortunes to those of his chief. *Widsith* shows us that it was this terrible and tragic tale which the old poets associated with the name of the hall Heorot, rather than that figure of Beowulf the monster-queller which the later poet has chosen to paint in the foreground."

The present reviewer is perhaps hardly qualified to speak impartially of Chapter IV, "Widsith and the Critics," since some of his own views in regard to the structure of the poem are here combated at some length. The fundamental question at issue here is, after all, one of method. Mr. Chambers favors a return to the methods of Müllenhoff and his followers. To those who distrust those methods he replies that arguments about plurality of authorship must define the exact scope of the interpolations in a given poem. "It is therefore the duty of a critic who believes a poem or play to be the work of several hands," he says, "to form a hard and definite theory, consistent with the facts that he has noted. The law of chance is against his theory being right in every detail. But a critic who is quite clear in his own mind as to exactly what he is trying to prove may often prove his general theory, even though we are in doubt as to many of the details. If he confines himself to generalities he will prove nothing."—Mr. Chambers here seems to have fallen under the spell of a fallacy which destroys the value of much "higher criticism." Precise and definite results give an air of scientific exactness, but when such exactness is by the very nature of the problem impossible, it is surely not indicative of "vagueness and confused thinking" to indicate in a general way such stylistic discrepancies as lead to the belief that a poem is the work of different hands, and abandon the attempt to fix definite boundaries. The second part of *Absalom and*

Achitophel, for example, is the combined work of Dryden and Tate. Lines 310–509 are generally believed, on the authority of Tonson, to have been written by Dryden. For the rest of the poem, the critic may surely with far more propriety point out lines or passages which appear to him reminiscent of one author or the other, and assert in a general way duality of composition, than assign fixed limits to the work of each.

Mr. Chambers dissents also from the results of Chadwick, Brandl, and Siebs, agreeing, in the main, with the theories of ten Brink. The most cursory examination of this chapter will illustrate strikingly the wide range of argument and conjecture as to the structure of the poem. That the end is not yet at hand is obvious from a recent review,² which gives hints of the nature of a forthcoming article on *Widsith* for Hoops' *Reallexicon für germanische Altertumskunde*.

Two shorter chapters follow, one treating of geography, the other of language and meter. Considerable space is devoted to the vexed question of the location of the country of the Myrings, to which is added further material in an appendix. Mr. Chadwick is inclined to identify it phonetically with the "Maurungani" of the Geographer of Ravenna, and to place it "south of the Eider in the modern Holstein." A general survey of the geography suggests the point of view of a gleeman of ancient Angel, and leads to the conclusion that the poem was made not long after the invasion of Britain, "whilst the traditions of the continental home were still fresh." Moreover, the geography confirms us in the belief "that *Widsith* cannot have any autobiographical basis, but that it represents an exceedingly early form of traditional lore, and that certain portions, which can be defined with some accuracy, are likely to be later interpolations." An excellent map at the end of the book makes the positions of the various peoples much clearer, and still another map traces the course followed by the voyager Ohthere. A study of the grammar of the poem reveals, according to Mr. Chambers,

¹ Is this reproach, as Mr. Chambers states it, justified?

² R. Jordan, *Englische Studien*, Vol. 45, pp. 300 ff.

instances of late usage in just those portions which earlier critics had been inclined to treat as accretions and interpolations, while the undoubted portions are primitive in grammar and metrical form.

"Reason has been shown," says the author, in the closing chapter, "for believing that these undoubted portions of the poem fall into two sections, originally distinct, the Catalogue of Kings, and the lay of Ealhild and Eormanric which we may regard as the essential *Widsith*. *Widsith*, alike on grounds of legend and geography, cannot be the work of a contemporary of Eadgils and Ealhild who really visited the court of Eormanric. The Catalogue of Kings is older than *Widsith* proper, yet on account of the names it contains it can hardly be earlier than the middle of the sixth century, and may be considerably later. *Widsith* seems to belong to a period later than this, but earlier than *Beowulf* or *Genesis*: that is, to the seventh century."

How far the minuteness of Mr. Chambers' studies have been from blinding him to the literary significance of the poem is well seen in his closing comments on its place in the history of Germanic verse. He feels that it reveals to us "the stock-in-trade of the old Anglian bard," and that "it demonstrates the dignity of the Old English narrative poetry, and of the common Germanic narrative poetry of which the Old English was but a section." Perhaps he is inclined to underrate the seriousness of *Beowulf*, and to over-emphasize the essentially childish *märchen*-plot, but he does not overrate the tragic power of the tales linked with the names of the heroes of *Widsith*. A review of his admirable book may fittingly close with the final sentences, a defence, if any there need be, for such minute and searching labor as his. "In the old heroic poetry we get a glimpse of the thoughts of those men whose unrecorded lives and deaths have done more to the building up of Europe than have the intrigues and quarrels of their lords. This should render sacred not only every recorded line of the old poems, but every paraphrase and every allusion."

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Œuvres de François Rabelais, édition critique publiée par ABEL LEFRANC, JACQUES BOULENGER, HENRI CLOUZOT, PAUL DORVEAUX, JEAN PLATTARD et LAZARE SAINÉAN. Tome premier: *Gargantua* (Prologue—Chapitres I–XXII). Paris, Champion, 1912. clvi + 214 pp.

M. Abel Lefranc is held in grateful remembrance by so many American students of the Romance languages that a book fathered by him is sure to receive a royal welcome in this country. The fine quarto volume before us comprises two diametrically opposed parts. There is, first, in beautiful large print, an *Étude de Gargantua* by M. Lefranc himself, supplemented by two essays, *L'Éducation de Gargantua* and *Thélème*, by M. Plattard, all of which any layman, interested in Rabelais, might read with the greatest of pleasure. The text here given, with its modern punctuation, capitalization and alignment, he might also enjoy reading. On the other hand, there are the voluminous notes in finer print, so voluminous that if read with the text as they are intended to be, running parallel with it, Rabelais himself is quite lost from sight. The reading of Rabelais becomes a study in the history of civilization, in archeology, in philology, in anything but Rabelais as literature. For simple pleasure in Rabelais, in the play of his imagination, in his pithily expressed and wise philosophy, in his marvelous gift of language, we must fall back on our old Burgaud des Marets and Rathery.

The question, therefore, immediately arises why there should be in a scholarly edition the slightest modernization of Rabelais' text. M. Boulenger,¹ after an examination of the ten editions of *Gargantua* that appeared during the life-time of Rabelais, decides that the last edition revised² by Rabelais (E) should form the basis of a critical edition. This text (E) is the same as that published by Marty-Laveaux, but Marty-Laveaux reproduces it with-

¹ Intro., pp. cvii–cxliii.

² Lyon, F. Juste, 1542.